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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s, the United States experienced a resurgence of interest in adult literacy that is likely to continue through the 1990s. The factors that have led to renewed concern about adult literacy include the following: a changing workplace requiring increased literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills; a recognition that new entrants to the work force are likely to be those who have not been served well by the educational system and therefore may lack the skills required by an increasingly complex work force; a concern for the nation's economic future and its ability to compete in a changing world market; and a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants and other adults for whom English is a second language. Some of the current issues in the field of adult literacy education include the following: (1) the definition of adult literacy; (2) the wide range of adult literacy providers; (3) the goals of literacy; (4) access and equity in the provision of adult literacy; and (5) instructional methods. (This literature summary contains an annotated list of 17 print resources and 10 resource organizations.) (KC)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

TRENDS AND ISSUES

ALERTS

ADULT LITERACY

During the 1980s, the United States experienced a resurgence of interest in adult literacy that is likely to continue through the 1990s. The factors that have led to renewed concern about adult literacy include a changing workplace requiring increased literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills; a recognition that new entrants to the work force are likely to be those who have not been served well by the educational system and therefore may lack the skills required by an increasingly complex work force; a concern for the nation's economic future and its ability to compete in a changing world market; and a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants and other adults for whom English is a second language, many of whom lack literacy skills in their own language (Crandall and Imel 1991).

The adult literacy education movement has engendered a number of issues that are surrounded by complex debates. Some of the current issues in the field of adult literacy education include the following (ibid.):

- **Definition.** Perhaps the most basic and pervasive issue confronting literacy education is the question of definition. What is literacy, what is the extent of illiteracy, and what should the national goals for literacy be?

- **Providers.** A diverse array of publicly and privately funded organizations provide adult literacy education. Although such diversity provides adults needing literacy training with a wide range of available services, it also makes it difficult to describe the system of adult literacy education in a coherent fashion.

- **Goals.** Concern about the nation's ability to maintain its competitiveness in a changing world market and an increasingly technological environment has exacerbated the debate about the goals and purposes of adult literacy education. The debate centers around whether adult literacy education should serve economic development goals or whether it should be an empowering process that takes into account adult learner social backgrounds, needs, and purposes.

- **Access and Equity.** Whether the goal of literacy programs is personal, community, work force, or national development, success depends on accessibility to and participation in education by the target population. Most adult educators are aware that those most in need of adult literacy programs and services are among the least served. Nonparticipation among certain groups of adults is an important social issue.

- **Approaches to Instruction.** An important question is who should determine the desired learner outcomes. Should the program follow external standards set by others or the internal standards people set for themselves? External standards may be viewed as minimal standards set by others; internal standards reflect individual decisions or hopes and ambitions concerning literacy.

This *Trends and Issues Alert* contains a number of resources that provide information about adult literacy. Included are print resources as well as organizations that can be contacted for further information.

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Print Resources

Chisman, F. P. ***Jump Start. The Federal Role in Adult Literacy.*** Southport, CT: Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, January 1989. (ED 302 675).

The final report of the Project on Adult Literacy (an independent, nonpartisan research effort) makes recommendations about the role the federal government should plan in promoting adult literacy.

Chisman, F. P., and Associates. ***Leadership for Literacy: The Agenda for the 1990s.*** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

Based on the report, ***Jump Start***, and its seven background papers, this book presents a leadership agenda for the 1990s, revealing the challenges and goals that must be met in order to provide effective policy for adult literacy.

Connections: A Journal of Adult Literacy. Volume 3. Spring 1989. Boston, MA: Adult Literacy Resource Institute; University of Massachusetts, 1989. (ED 310 289).

The 10 articles in this journal discuss issues of adult literacy/adult basic education from a variety of perspectives. Topics include whole language experience approach, language minority issues, unprepared students in higher education, and workplace education programs.

Crandall, J., and Imel, S. "Issues in Adult Literacy Education." ***The ERIC Review*** 1, no. 2, (March 1991): 2-8.

Brings a variety of perspectives to a review of eight current issues in adult literacy education including professionalization of the field, evaluation and assessment, goals of instruction, and access and equity.

Fingeret, H. A. "Who Are Illiterate Adults?" ***Adult Learning*** 1, no. 6 (April 1990): 27.

Describes how assumptions underlying adults with low-level skills have led to stereotypes that misrepresent their abilities.

Forlizzi, L. A. ***Adult Literacy in the United States Today.*** University Park: Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, Pennsylvania State University, 1989. (ED 317 757).

Provides an overview of the status of adult literacy in the U. S. by pointing out that many citizens do not have literacy skills adequate to meet their needs and ambitions, highlights types of available literacy services and major providers, and addresses issues related to delivery of literacy services.

Hayes, E. R., and Snow, B. R. "The Ends and Means of Adult Literacy Education." ***Lifelong Learning*** 12, no. 8 (June 1989): 12-15, 18.

Compares and contrasts the goals and methods of community-oriented and individually oriented adult literacy programs to identify the ideological and methodological stances within each.

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Imel, S. ***Adult Literacy Issues: An Update. ERIC Digest no. 89.*** Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, The Ohio State University, 1989. (ED 308 402).

Examines three issues in adult literacy education that emerged in the late 1980s: purpose and goals, professionalization of the field, and evaluation of adult literacy programs.

Kazemek, F. E. "Adult Literacy Education: Heading into the 1990s." ***Adult Education Quarterly*** 41, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 53-62.

Reviews five recent publications in adult literacy using Hunter and Harman's ***Adult Illiteracy in the United States*** as a yardstick, concluding that the literature still perpetuates unproductive literacy stereotypes and practices, despite strides in theory, research, and practice.

Kazemek, F. E. "Necessary Changes: Professional Involvement in Adult Literacy Programs." ***Harvard Educational Review*** 58, no. 4 (November 1988): 464-487.

Critiques demeaning attitudes toward adult literacy learners implicit in the practices of major literacy programs and examines underlying assumptions about the nature of literacy in light of recent studies.

Lytle, S. L., and Wolfe, M. ***Adult Literacy Education: Program Evaluation and Learner Assessment. Information Series no. 338.*** Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, The Ohio State University, 1989. (ED 315 665).

Following a review of contrasting perspectives on adult literacy education, this paper reviews current literature on program evaluation and learner assessment, concluding with implications and future directions.

"Myth #11. The 'Feds' Are Readying a Campaign on Literacy." ***The Literacy Beat***, 3, no. 2 (April-May 1989): 1-7. (ED 317 865).

Examines questions that have arisen regarding the federal role in literacy in the context of recent initiatives.

Newman, A. P., and Beverstock, C. ***Adult Literacy: Contexts and Challenges***. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills; Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1990. (ED 321 251).

Reporting recent studies, this book discusses the history of the adult literacy movement, especially in the United States, and reports on scholarship, practice, and challenges confronting the movement.

Speaking Our Own Voice. Report of the Conference for Literacy Practitioners. Toronto, Ontario: Toronto Board of Education, 1988. (ED 317 746).

Report summarizes a day-long conference that addressed the many ways in which literacy education can become more inclusive of adult learners.

Spener, D. ***The Freirean Approach to Adult Literacy Education***. NCLE Q&A. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, Center for Applied Linguistics, April 1990. (ED 321 615).
Presents an overview of the Freirean approach to adult literacy education, which bases the content of language lessons on learners' cultures and personal experiences.

Venezky, R. L; Wagner, D. A.; and Ciliberti, B. S., eds. ***Toward Defining Literacy***. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1990. (ED 313 677).

Contains short articles and responses addressing the interlocking nature of four issues: the definition of literacy, who controls literacy education, the purpose of literacy education, and the relationship between literacy and social and economic justice.

Wagner, D. A. ***Literacy and Research: Past, Present and Future. Literacy Lessons***. Geneva, Switzerland: International Bureau of Education, 1990. (ED 321 042).

Reviews research in literacy, pointing out issues it has raised that are likely to investigated in the future.

Resource Organizations

American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, 1112 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006 (202/463-6333).

American Library Association, Office of Library Outreach Services, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611 (312/944-6780, ext. 453).

Association for Community Based Education, 1806 Vernon Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009 (202/462-6333).

Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, 35th Floor, New York, NY 10020 (212/512-2415).

Clearinghouse on Adult Education and Literacy, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue SW, Mail Stop 7240, Room 44, Washington, DC 20202-7420 (202/732-2396).

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090 (800/848-4815 or 614/292-4353).

Laubach Literacy Action, 1320 Jamesville Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13210 (315/422-9121).

Literacy Network, Inc. 475 Cleveland Avenue N., Suite 211, St. Paul, MN 55104 (612/646-5070).

Literacy Volunteers of America, 5795 Widewaters Parkway, Syracuse, NY 13214 (315/445-8000).

National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, 1118 22nd Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037 (202/429-9292).

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